

Escape From Churchianity

by Chip Brogden

It is important that we make a clear distinction between the True Church (the Ecclesia) and the Institutional Church, Organized Religion, or religion in general. The easiest way to begin is to discuss one critical thing that Organized Religion cannot do.

Organized Religion cannot impart Life.

"This is our testimony, that God has given us Eternal Life, and this Life is in His Son: He that has the Son has Life, and He that has not the Son of God has not Life (I John 5:11,12)."

Contrary to popular belief, the Lord Jesus Christ does not live within the matrix of Organized Religion. The Ecclesia, like our Lord, is Wholly Other. I can prove it to you beyond the shadow of a doubt. Can you join a "church" ? Yes, if you meet their requirements for membership. Can you join the Ecclesia? No. You have to be born into it. Or, to be more correct, you have to be born-again into it. It is not a question of joining or not joining, but a question of having Life versus not having Life. "He that has the Son has Life; He that has not the Son has not Life."

Some erroneously believe Jesus founded a movement, or formed a new religion. No, the world already had movements and religions, and would continue to have them. He had no intention of starting a new one. What did He bring us? What did He contribute to the world? He committed Himself to us as our Life.

Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, or Socrates can bring us good teaching, moral excellence, and religious philosophy. For this they may be commended as rendering help and aid to humanity. But Jesus Christ is different: He brings us Himself as our Life. It is not that He merely transmits some teachings to us, depositing some virtue into the human race, before being taken up into heaven. It is well beyond Him simply being an example for us to follow, the standard by which our morals are measured as we frantically whisper, "What would Jesus do?". No, He Himself came to be our Life. He is Savior, and Salvation. He is Redeemer, and Redemption. He is Healer, and Healing. He is the Giver of Life, and He is Life.

In Him is Life because He is Life. All who are in Him possess Life, and Life possesses them. The Life is in the Son. The Son is in me, and I am in Him. We share in a common Life. "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him (I Corinthians 6:7)."

Everyone together who possess Life are called the Ecclesia, the Church, the Body of Christ. The individual members of the Ecclesia are called Christians. They are the in-Christed ones. They abide in Him, and He abides in them.

You ask is not a Christian one who believes thus and so, or behaves thus and so. We answer that they may very well believe or behave thus and so, but the belief or the behavior, while it may assist us in identifying them, is not what makes them a Christian. It is the Life. Certainly, Christians have a core system of beliefs and practices. But the characteristic of a Christian is Life. It is not even "the Lord of my life", implying something apart from Him that I still have control over; it is "the Lord AS my Life."

An intellectual Christianity is what Organized Religion brings. It cannot impart Life. What do I mean by an intellectual Christianity? It is the ABC Gospel. Perhaps you have heard it. Salvation is obtained in three easy steps: "A" stands for "admit you are a sinner"; "B" stands for "believe on the Lord Jesus to save you"; and "C" stands for "confess Jesus as your personal Savior." What is wrong with that? Simply this: there is no Life there. "ABC" will not save us. With "ABC" there is no encounter with Jesus, Who alone is Life. There is only an intellectual acceptance and affirmation of what is presented as "Three Easy Steps". I believe this, I say that, and that makes me a Christian, right? No, it just makes you religious. There are many people who "get religion", but they don't get Jesus.

Organized Religion has caused Christianity to morph into Churchianity, a gospel which is easy to believe in but progressively more difficult to live up to.

Organized Religion can bring doctrine, teaching, and belief. Some of it may be morally excellent and good. Some of it may even sound Biblical, like "Three Easy Steps". Nevertheless, Organized Religion cannot impart Life. Why? Because it has no Life to give. Jesus Christ is the Life. And Jesus does not live within the matrix of

Organized Religion. He gives HIMSELF. How can any man, organization, or movement claim to give away another man, much less impart the very Life of Jesus Christ? Only Jesus can give Himself as our Life.

You see, then, that the most anyone can do is point people to Jesus as the sole Source of Life. They may contact Life through us, but we cannot give them Life. To those bound by Organized Religion, Jesus cries "You search the Scriptures, because you think in them you have Life. You are content to read about Me, but you will not come to Me that you may have Life (John 5:39,40, paraphrased)." Come to Me! Not, "Memorize these Three Easy Steps and attend the Church of your choice this Sunday." Come to Me! He is Life.

The Church, the Lord's Ecclesia, is the synthesis of individuals who have the Revelation of Jesus and have come to Him to receive Him as their Life. Here is where the confusion begins. We glibly use the term "church" to describe things which are not The Lord's Ecclesia. A building devoted to religious meetings is called "the church". Attending a religious meeting is called "going to church." Hearing a good message or good music during the religious meeting is called "having church" (a popular tune says "crank up the music, let's have church!"). Becoming a member of the non-profit organization which owns the building devoted to religious meetings is called "joining the church". Taking responsibility as the founder or being voted in as the director of the non-profit organization which owns the building devoted to religious meetings is called "pastoring the church". Making additions to the building devoted to religious meetings or to the membership list of the non-profit organization which owns the building is called "church growth".

Why are we being so facetious and wordy? Why do we choose our phraseology carefully? For the sake of convenience, or just plain laziness, people have grown accustomed to saying "church" instead of "a non-profit organization that owns a building devoted to religious meetings." Whatever nomenclature you decide upon, we are drawing the line and making a distinction between "The Church" and "church". We hope to impress upon you the difference between what people customarily call "church" and what the Lord considers to be "The Church". As demonstrated above, much of what we call "church" is simply Organized Religion. It is not the Lord's Ecclesia.

We simply see things the way we have been trained to see them; we do not see things as God sees them. It is very easy to quantify and describe things in terms of Organized Religion because it is earthy, worldly, natural. Ask someone on the street. What is church? Why, it is that building there with a steeple on top. What is a pastor? The fellow who does the preaching. What is a Christian? The folks who read their Bible a lot and pray a lot and go to church a lot - you know, doing good works. You see how easy it is to define. It is tangible, concrete. We can get our hands on that.

But the reality is that everything which makes up the Ecclesia is spiritual, and thus, it is invisible to the naked eye. It is non-corporeal. It cannot be measured by dollars and statistics. Now ask the same questions of someone who knows better. What is church? The Church, the Ecclesia, is the synthesis of individuals who have the Revelation of Jesus and have come to Him to receive Him as their Life. Pray tell, where do I find that? What do I look for? You can't do it, it's like trying to find the wind at 101 North Main Street. It is beyond geographical description; it is everywhere and nowhere. What is a pastor? Someone called to feed the Lord's sheep as an under shepherd of the Chief Shepherd. Huh? You mean preaching? No, not necessarily. You mean a doctor of theology? No, not really. Oh never mind: what is a Christian? Oh that's easy, someone who is in Christ. What do you mean "in Christ"? Don't you mean "believes in Christ?" No, I mean IS in Christ, in union, one with Him. So what does THAT look like? How many chapters of the Bible do they read per day? How long do they pray? How often do they attend church? It defies explanation because the truth is it has nothing to do with the external, only the internal. Like the wind: you can see the effects of it but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes; so are they which are born of the Spirit (John 3). This invisible Life is the characteristic of the Ecclesia. When you can capture the wind in a bag then you can stuff Christians into a building and call it "church". "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21)."

So, from our vantage point here on earth, Organized Religion can be easily seen, felt, touched, experienced, quantified, denominated, characterized, categorized, analyzed, and explained. We can chart its progress and hang the data up on the wall, point to it and say yep, we've got this many million converts here, and this many million members there. Church growth is up (or down), we collected this many billions of dollars last year, and in relation to the rest of the world's religions we rank number whatever. We've got this many thousands of churches in this part of the world, we have this many thousands of pastors and Christian workers, and we've translated the Bible into this many different languages.

Meanwhile, what drives the Real Church, the Ecclesia, is invisible, spiritual, ethereal, in the world but not of the world, hidden, veiled, hard to describe in terms we can understand. We can't generate the data and hang it up on the wall. Even those who know what the Ecclesia is sometimes have difficulty expressing themselves. Ask them where to find the Church of which they so longingly speak, and they are apt to reply, "I'm not sure if I know where the Church is, brother, but I sure know where it ain't!"

Now imagine that the Lord wakes you up one night and says, "Come up hither, and I will show you the Church." You expect Him to carry you down the street to the Family Worship Center or across the country to where the crowds say they are experiencing revival; but instead you find yourself rising high into the air, leaving the earth behind, and in the blink of an eye you travel beyond the edges of the temporal universe and into the spirit realm, seated with Christ in heavenly places, there in the throne of God.

Seated with the Lord and looking back down upon the world, we find from this perspective that the cathedrals, the church buildings, the worship centers, the sanctuaries, the denominational offices, the seminaries, the tithes and offerings, the membership drives, the movements, all vanish from sight. Everything melts away. He does not see the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptists, the United Methodists, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians, or the Roman Catholics. He does not see Charismatics or Fundamentalists or Bible Belts or Christian Conservatives or Religious Rights. He does not see the building devoted to religious meetings as anything more special or significant than the grocery store or barber shop. He sees pastors, yes, but strangely, He does not see every director of a non-profit organization who owns a building devoted to religious meetings as a pastor. And it is not just the pastors that are different, from our heavenly observation point. Everything seems odd. Backwards. Apostles are not where you expect them to be, and they are not doing what you expect them to be doing; neither are prophets, evangelists, or teachers. Yet, they are right where He wants them to be, doing exactly what He wants them to do. Interestingly enough, He is not concerned with a rise or a decline in church attendance because He does not see the Church as something which can be attended. Hmmm.

Standing next to Him we see as He sees. We realize when we look upon Christendom that all God sees there is His Church, the Ecclesia. He deems those who abide in Him, those who possess the Son, as those who have Life. His Church is not declining, it is growing because His Life cannot be contained or restricted. His Ecclesia is outside the matrix. His Church is spiritual, and as such, it is eternal, transcending time and space. Just as He is, and does.

You look upon His Face and see the curve of His smile, so you follow His gaze - and there it is, the living stones and precious gems which make up His Church. You couldn't see them before, because you were right in the middle of it while still on earth. But now, far removed from it all and looking down upon it from the Lord's perspective, you see that the living stones are being assembled together into a brilliant, gleaming, dazzling building which covers the entire earth! An angel stands apart from it, shouting, "100% pure: never touched by human hands!" You zoom in closer and discover that the stones and gems are not literal stones and gems, but people! Wonderful, beautiful, joy-filled people, joined together into a striking mosaic of vibrant colors, a tapestry of interwoven beauty, a medley of lives in perfect twelve-part harmony, all pulsing with His heartbeat, His Life, His Essence. You begin to weep at the unadulterated purity of it and oneness of it. There is no spot, wrinkle, or blemish to be found.

Only God could make something this gorgeous. Only God. Only God. And there in the midst of this wonderful place, you see what makes it so splendid...

There HE is, walking around in the midst of this Temple, adding living stone upon living stone, precious gem upon precious gem, and what do you hear? Singing? Yes. The Living Stones are crying out in praise. And He is smiling, and - whistling! - while He works.

Jesus is building His Church.

Then, as quickly as it began, it is over.

You open your eyes and find yourself back on earth, having returned to your three-dimensional world. It's a sunny day, the birds are singing, the church bells are ringing, and you see men, women, and children walking down the street, carrying their Bibles. You rush out into the road and grab an elderly gentleman.

"Where are you going? What's going on? Why are you so dressed up?"

"Get your hands off me, you crazy idiot! It's Sunday morning, and I'm going to church!"

"You've seen the Church??"

"Seen it? Of course I've seen it. My great-great grandfather helped build that church!"

"No, I mean have you SEEN the CHURCH," you repeat emphatically. "The Church that JESUS is building!"

"I don't know what the devil you're talking about, young man. Now let me alone, or I'll be late!"

You let him go and before you know it you are swept along by the crowd and find yourself sitting within the four walls of a building that calls itself "First Hypocritical Church, International."

The service is just beginning. The pastor approaches the lectern and announces, "Let's all stand and sing!"

Not sure what to do, you join in the chorus:

Know ye not, know ye not ye are the Temple?
Know ye not, know ye not ye are the Temple?
Know ye not, know ye not ye are the Temple?
Ye are the Temple of the Holy Ghost!

At the end of the song the pastor appears at the lectern again and matter-of-factly shouts, "Isn't it good to be in the house of God today!" It's more of a statement than a question. And all the people say, "AMEN!"

Hope rises! The House of God! Maybe he's seen it too! Forgetting where you are, you stand up and excitedly shout "Have YOU seen the House of God, brother?"

"Amen!" He replies. "It's good to be in church this morning!"

"Amen!" the people agree.

"No, wait a minute," you interrupt, mouthing the words ever so slowly and deliberately, as if you were talking to a deaf lip reader. "Have you SEEN the CHURCH, brother? The Church that JESUS is building?"

All heads are turned now, facing you. The old man, one of the deacons, whispers, "That's the weirdo I met on the way to church this morning!"

The pastor is growing impatient. "This IS the church, brother. Hallelujah!"

"But sir," you press, "KNOW YE NOT YE ARE THE TEMPLE???"

The silence is deafening.

"You are the Temple. WE are the Temple! Jesus is building His Church! I've seen it! It's a wonderful House of Living Stones, filled with His Life! We are the Church that He is building! We are the Living Stones, the Precious Gems! I saw Jesus, and He was smiling and placing the stones together, and..."

Some teenagers on the back row are giggling.

"I've seen it! It's true! The stones... the jewels... it's gorgeous!"

The people are looking at the pastor to see what he will do.

Slowly it dawns on you. You realize that to them you are an alien from another planet trying to communicate something that is so real to you but is totally foreign to the rest of the world.

Desperately you grab the man standing next to you by the shoulders, thinking to shake it into him. "You don't believe me... But it's true! You sing about it... but you don't believe it! YOU ARE THE TEMPLE! You have to believe me! I've seen it! Jesus is building His Church!"

The ushers are making their way over to your place in the pew.

Sweating and shaking, you look around the sanctuary, wild-eyed. "No, something's wrong here. Everything is different... this isn't the Church! I mean, you're calling it church, but this isn't what I've seen at all. No, the Church is... is... One Flock with One Shepherd, not divided up into denominations and sects! It's a mosaic of people! It's a tapestry of rich colors! It's a medley..." You begin to sob. "Listen to me! Know ye not ye are the Temple?!?"

The congregation is uncomfortable and agitated. The old deacon is ashen-faced, glaring at the pastor to put an end to this.

"Friend," the pastor finally manages, "if you'll go with the ushers I'm sure we can better minister to you in private. With every head bowed and every eye closed, why don't we go to the Lord in prayer right now."

While every head is bowed and every eye is closed, except the pastor's head and eyes, the ushers quickly hustle you out the back door and throw you down the steps.

The pastor smiles. "and the church said... AMEN. Amen. You may be seated. Well, praise the Lord. Today my message is entitled, 'What It Means To Be A Christian'. Turn in your Bibles to..."

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If God would grant you a moment by His side and allow you a fleeting glance at His Church you would at once understand what a pitiful substitute we have in Organized Religion. There is no vanity so deep as religious vanity, nothing more sickening and diametrically opposed to the heart and ultimate purpose of God.

And we who are in Christ Jesus ARE seated with Him in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6).

If God is pleased to grant you this vision of His Church then you will come to appreciate it as a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because to see things as He sees them is true Wisdom and Oneness with Him and His people. A curse, because to see things as He sees them will ruin you for life, for you will never again be able to accept the surrogate, the counterfeit, even the good, at the expense of the Holy. His Church, His Treasure, how holy and pure and wonderful and unspeakable it is! Before you would casually call this thing and that thing "church" just like everyone else does and find it socially acceptable, but now your skin will crawl and your stomach will twist in knots when you hear others call some building the "house of God", knowing full well that His House is not this dead thing made with human hands!

It will not be enough for you to then say: "Lord, the Church belongs to You, not to me, not to anyone. Now I see my mistake. I take my hands off of it, for it is not mine to control or run. I repent of trying to build what you wish to destroy, and destroying what you wish to build. What am I, Lord, but a little stone, a little sheep, a little member of a wonderful Body of Believers? You are building Your Church, and now I will let you do it. At last I see. Only let me find a quiet place to serve You and serve Your people in secret, for I want nothing else for me, but all of it for You."

No, once you see this, once you take your hands off of His Bride, once you stop beating your brothers and sisters in the Name of God, then you will be jealous over His Church with His jealousy, and will be so sensitive and so aware of false pastors and false teachers and false evangelists and false prophets and false apostles - yes, all that would abuse and confuse and rape and pillage His People! It is a question of seeing! And see, you will! You will see as He sees, hear as He hears, feel as He feels. "He was angered at their hardness of heart." Without effort, without trying, you will see right through the false, the quasi-faith, the pseudo-spirituality, the whitewashed tombs full of dead men's bones. Once you have had a taste of Real Life, you smell Death a thousand miles away, and your spirit rebels against it, your emotions scream in protest, and you are sick to your stomach with grief, anger, and compassion all at once. "No! This is not the Ecclesia. This is not the Lord's Church. This is a sham. This is bogus. This is nothing but Organized Religion!"

May God have mercy on us, and give us such a revelation of Himself, and His Church, that we may escape from Churchianity and find Life.

We are not suggesting that you challenge the system this Sunday by provoking a public confrontation with some unsuspecting pastor. All the argument in the world will not convince people, nor should we attempt to make people see. Simply allow them to see. Look upon the face of Him who sees things as they are, that others may look into your eyes and see Him as He is. One minute of seeing is worth a lifetime of argument. God will grant us a discerning heart and eyes to see if we will ask for them, and if we are willing to accept both the joy and the burden that accompanies such a revelation.

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